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## SUMMER RAIN AND SPRINGS OF WATER IN GREEK AND HEBREW POETRY

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Those who were in Madison during the summer session of 1909 will probably never forget the drought that was exactly coextensive with the school period. The curse of Isaiah's God seemed to be on the land: "Ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water." Pindar's words expressed our feelings:

There is a time when men stand most in need  
Of breezes fair, a time when most for rains they long,  
Cloud's stormy children. (*Ol.* x.)

I do not think I ever sympathized so completely with suffering Nature as then. From boyhood I have loved the fall of rain in summer drought, sympathizing with the plants that rejoiced in the God-given shower as the thirsty wayfarer, worn out with heat and dust, kneels and drinks with delight from a cool spring by the way-side. On the evening of August 7 I stood bareheaded to welcome a few drops that fell from the gathering clouds, longing and hoping that more might come toward morning. About 4 A.M. (August 8) the big drops that usually precede and presage a big shower rattled on the roof, and instantly I was awake. The next moment there was a downpour, and I recalled then Aeschylus' words, *ψεκὰς δὲ λήγει*, "it ceases to drizzle"—i.e., the storm is on—referring to the storm-blast of the ancestral curse upon the house of Atreus. There were three heavy showers at intervals, lasting perhaps an hour; but I heard it all. I was too happy to sleep. The prophet Isaiah (35:6) exactly expressed my feelings: "Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out and streams in the desert. And the glowing land shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." Recalling Clytemnestra's splendid simile of the corn rejoicing in the summer rain, to express how grateful to the long-cherished hate of her revengeful heart was

the blood that spouted upon her hands and bosom from the gashes she gave Agamemnon, I knew that Aeschylus felt joy in the summer rain just as I was feeling it, and it occurred to me that the Greek must be full of such similes; for what could appeal more strongly to poetic sensibility than just such a phenomenon—all Nature changed suddenly from drooping and sadness into songs of joy. It might have been better for me—worn out with teaching, six weeks at nineteen hours a week—if the effect had been like that upon Thomas Carlyle, as described by Froude: “The rain fell and cooled the July air, and Carlyle slept; and at once the universe became more tolerable.” But I was too happy for that. I ran over in my mind all the passages I could recall, in the *Agamemnon* and elsewhere in Greek poetry, referring to rain or fountains of water, and vowed, if I could not write a poem on water, I would at least compile a paper on the Greek poets’ feeling for rain in drought or springs of water in a dry and thirsty land.

Aeschylus borrowed the splendid figure which he placed in the mouth of Clytemnestra from Homer (*Il.* xxiii. 597–600)—“fragments from Homer’s mighty banquet-table.”

Τοῖο δὲ θυμὸς  
 ἰάνθη, ὥς εἴτε περὶ σταχέουσιν ἑέρση  
 λήϊον ἀλδήσκοντος, ὅτε φρίσσουσιν ἄρουραι  
 ὥς ἄρα σοι, Μενέλαε, μετὰ φρεσὶ θυμὸς ἰάνθη,

And his heart was gladdened as when the dew  
 Cometh upon the ears of ripening harvest-corn,  
 What time the fields are bristling. So gladdened was thy soul,  
 Menelaus, within thy heart.

Aeschylus imitates this in one of the most powerful passages of the *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra exults over the accomplished murder of her husband:

Κἄκφυσιῶν ὀξείαν αἵματος σφαγὴν  
 βάλλει μ’ ἐρεμνῇ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσσον  
 χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἦσσαν ἢ διουσιότῳ  
 γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν,  
 (*Agam.* 1389 ff.)

And breathing out the quick sharp rush of blood  
 With the black drop of gory dew he strikes me,  
 Nor gladdens less than when, parturient of the bud,  
 The seed rejoiceth in the sky-descending rain.

The Homeric passage was imitated also by Apollonius Rhodius in the *Argonautica*, but with a more artificial word-play, viz.:

λαίνεται δὲ φρένας ἔσω  
 τηκομένη οἶόντε περὶ ῥοδέησιν ἔρση  
 τήκεται ἥψουσιν λαίνομένη φαέεσιν,

And her heart glowed through and through  
 Melting for rapture away, from the lips of the rose as the dew  
 At the sun's kiss melteth away, when the day-spring is kindled anew.

In the comparisons of Homer and Aeschylus it is the corn that rejoices in the dew or the rain; in that of Apollonius it is the dew itself that is in rapture as it melts under the kiss of the sun; and whereas in the former cases it is the corn of the field that is refreshed, in the latter it is the rose of the garden; the weather-phenomenon is the same.

Doubtless Vergil, too, had the Homeric simile in mind in the following passage:

Vel cum ruit imbriferum ver  
 Spicea iam campis cum messis inhorruit et cum  
 Frumenta in viridi stipula lactentia turgent,

Or when showerful spring pours down, when the spiky harvest even now ripples on the plains, and when the green blade swells with her milky grain.

The season of the year and the state of the grain are the same, but Vergil has in mind the disastrous effect of a heavy rain on corn just coming to flower, beating it down and damaging it, while Homer and Aeschylus refer to the gentle rain that refreshes. The Homeric or the Aeschylean or the Vergilian simile, perhaps all three, were in mind when Valerius Flaccus wrote (*Argonautica* vii. 23-25):

(Of Medea who has passed a sleepless night thinking of Jason)  
 Nec minus insomnem lux orta refecit amantem,  
 Quam cum languentes levis erigit imber aristas,  
 Grataque iam fessis descendunt somnia remis,  
 Not less does the light of dawn refresh the sleepless lover  
 Than does the light shower lift up the drooping ears,  
 And sweet slumber descends upon the weary oars.

Such dew or rain as they have in mind the Hebrew poet means when he makes the Lord say (Deut. 32:2): "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain on the

tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass." Or as the Psalmist meant when he said (Ps. 72:6): "he shall come down as the rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth."

One more reference to the beneficent effect of rain I find in Aeschylus (frag. 38):

The pure bright heaven still yearns to blend with earth,  
And earth is filled with love for marriage rites,  
And from the kindly sky the rain-shower falls  
And fertilizes earth, and earth for men  
Yields grass for sheep, and corn, Demeter's gift.

One of the Anacreontic odes, too, a drinking-song (21), uses the figure from the summer shower:

Observe when Mother Earth is dry  
She drinks the droppings of the sky;  
And then the dewy cordial gives  
To every thirsty plant that lives.

But there is surprisingly little of this sort of thing, for a people unusually sensitive to the moods and changes of Nature and inhabiting a warm southern country where drought is not infrequent in summer. In the Greek poets it is Nature in her terrible or dangerous moods that chiefly finds expression—in rain-storm or snow-storm, hurricane, hail, thunder, and lightning. The Greek heaven, it will be remembered, was rainless: "Not by winds is it shaken nor ever wet with rain, nor doth the snow come nigh thereto, but most clear air is spread about it cloudless, and the white light floats over it. Therein the blessed gods are glad for all their days." This passage Tennyson practically translates for the island-valley of Avilion in his *Passing of Arthur*.

We might, it is true, have expected these gentler phenomena of Nature in her kindly moods more in the lyric poets than in epic or tragedy; but we have from these, of course, only scattered fragments. Of the two lyric poets that have come down to us in any considerable bulk, the subject of Pindar's *Epinikia* perhaps excluded most references of this sort; but in Theocritus they would have been in place. Yet one looks there in vain for such figures or similes. He is sensitive to the delights of the cool shade, leafy

bowers, trickling water, the whispering pines, luxuriant grass, abundant luscious fruit—witness the 2d and 7th Idylls—but the joy of seeing thirsty plants and flowers and trees drinking greedy draughts of showers of rain, Theocritus says nothing about.

If this is not accident, due to the loss of the great bulk of Greek poetry—though this explanation is hardly admissible in view of the fact that we have the forty-eight books of Homer, as well as thirty-two tragedies and eleven comedies—then it is strange, and the more so when we compare Hebrew poetry. The Israelites lived on the eastern shore of the same great sea, nearly in the same latitude, and under not very different climatic conditions; but in their literature we find frequent allusion to the beneficent influence of rain. When I arose on that August morning to look out upon the plants in the garden and the grass in the yard, I knew the Psalmist felt just as I did when he sang (Ps. 65:10 ff.): “Thou causest rain to descend into the furrows thereof; thou makest it soft with showers; thou blessest the springing thereof. Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness and the little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.”

The Hebrew prophet, too, felt this beneficent influence of the gentle rain, and under it his prophecy would sometimes turn to poetry, as when Micah (5:7) comforts his people with the words: “And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass;” or as when Zechariah (10:1) said: “Ask ye of the Lord rain in the time of the latter rain: the Lord shall make bright clouds and give them showers of rain, to everyone grass in the field.” Nor was Isaiah less poetic when he said (55:10): “For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, and giveth seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth.” Or again (44:3): “For I will pour water upon the place that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon thy seed and my blessings upon thine offspring;

and they shall spring up among the grass, as willows by the water-courses.”

Shelley understood this joy of Nature revived and refreshed by rain. Of the Skylark’s note he says:

Sound of vernal showers  
On the twinkling grass,  
Rain-awakened flowers,  
All that ever was

Joyous and clear and fresh thy music doth surpass.

And his *Cloud* sings:

From my wings are shaken dews that waken  
The sweet buds every one.

I wield the flail of the lashing hail,  
And whiten the green plains under,  
And then again I dissolve it in rain  
And laugh as I pass in thunder.<sup>1</sup>

Now the other phase of the subject. What the rain from heaven is to the dry soil and drooping plant, that the spring of welling water is to the man or beast famishing with thirst. Here too the *locus classicus* is found in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, and again in a speech of Clytemnestra’s. She is welcoming her husband home, after ten long years, and, as she has not been faithful to her lord, she overdoes her pretended joy. She doth protest too much; but her figures are splendid all the same.

λέγοιμ’ ἂν ἄνδρα τόνδε τῶν σταθμῶν κύνα,  
σωτήρα ναὸς πρότονον, ὑψηλῆς στέγης  
στῦλον ποδῆρην, μονογενὲς τέκνον πατρί,  
καὶ γῆν φανείσαν ναυτίλοις παρ’ ἐλπίδα,  
κάλλιστον ἡμᾶρ εἰσιδεῖν ἐκ χείματος,  
ὁδοιπόρῳ δαψῶντι πηγᾶιν βέος,

I hail my lord as watch-dog of the fold,  
As saving stay-rope of a storm-tossed ship,  
As columns stout that hold the roof aloft,  
As only child unto a sire bereaved,  
As land beheld, past hope, by crews forlorn,  
As sunshine fair when tempest’s wrath is past,  
As gushing spring to thirsty wayfarer.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. George Meredith’s poem, “Earth and a Wedded Wife”—comparison of a withered heart with drooping Nature. Also, “Rainfall,” *The Evening Standard and St. James Gazette*, July 27, 1910.

The last verse contains the figure on which I wish to dwell for a moment. Aeschylus did not borrow it from Homer, and it is common enough in Greek epigrams (Mackail, *Epigrams*, "Nature," III), e.g.:

Rest here beneath the shelter of this rock  
Your tired limbs, stranger. Here the murmuring breeze  
Plays softly mid the green leaves, and you may drink  
Cool water from the spring—to wayfarers  
A sweet relief in sultry summer's heat.

or "Drink not here, traveler, from this warm pool in the brook, full of mud stirred by the sheep at pasture; but going a very little way over the ridge where the heifers are grazing, there by yonder pastoral stone-pine thou wilt find bubbling through the fountained rock a spring colder than northern snow." Or still again: "I, the everflowing Clear Fount, gush forth for passing wayfarers from the neighboring dell; and on every side I am bordered with planes and soft-bloomed laurels, and make coolness and shade to lie in. Therefore pass me not by in summer; rest by me in quiet, ridding thee of thirst and weariness." Such a spring Theocritus describes in his *Golden Idyll*:

Oh, many a poplar quivered overhead,  
And many an elm-tree waved above us there,  
While near at hand with bubbling music flowed  
The sacred spring-stream from the nymph's own hand.

Catullus has the same figure (lxviii.58):

rivus muscoso prosilit e lapide  
. . . . .  
dulce viatori lasso in sudore levamen.  
Cum gravis exustos aestus hiulcat agros.  
The brook leaps forth from the mossy stone  
. . . . .  
A sweet solace to the toil-worn wayfarer,  
When the parched ground breaks open in the grievous heat.

Compare Vergil (*Ecl.* v. 45 ff.):

Tale tuum nobis carmen, divine poeta,  
Quale sopor fessis in gramine, quale per aestum  
Dulcis aquae saliente sitim restinguere rivo.  
Welcome thy song to me, oh sacred bard,  
As to the weary, sleep upon the grass:  
As in the summer heat, a bubbling spring  
Of sweetest water, that shall slake our thirst.



But here again we must turn to the Hebrew for most frequent use of the figure. In Isaiah (58:11) the Lord is addressed: "And thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters fail not." Again by the same prophet the Christ is prefigured in a splendid passage (32:2): "And a man shall be as a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." It is practically the same figure again in Proverbs (25:25): "As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country." And Solomon's beloved was (Song 4:15): "a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon." This last was probably the inspiration of Poe's use of the figure ("To One in Paradise"):

Thou wast all to me, love,  
For which my soul did pine—  
A green isle in the sea, love,  
A fountain and a shrine.

It suggested the figure doubtless to Thompson-Seton, who says: "To the partridge-lover burnt up with thirst his new mate was a cooling spring in sight."